

CESAR CUI

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Cesar Cui was born in Vilna on 18 January 1835. He was the son of a French army officer who was unable to follow the retreat from Moscow in 1812 and remained in Poland. He married a girl from Lithuania and was professor of French in Vilna, where his son was to be a student.

Cesar studied military engineering at university becoming a Lieutenant General of Engineers and an authority of fortifications. He had some music lessons with Moniuszko in 1850 but his military career was the source of his income and not to be given up.

The young engineer met Balakirev in 1856 who inspired Cui to take a closer interest in music. They shared ideals in nationalistic music.

Rimsky Korsakov met Cesar Cui for the first time at the home of Mily Balakirev in 1861. Balakirev was a truly magnificent pianist and, indeed, a fine all-round musician. Here the music of Cui and Mussorgsky was played and analysed. Rimsky Korsakov was very close to Balakirev in his student days but not so with Mussorgsky and Cui. It seems that Cui tried to dissuade Rimsky from a career at sea believing he should devote himself to music. However they did see Rimsky off at St Petersburg.

Cui had performances of his Scherzo in F performed, but it is thought that Balakirev orchestrated it, as well as two other scherzos for the piano in C and G sharp minor respectively and his Dances from The Prisoner of the Caucasus.

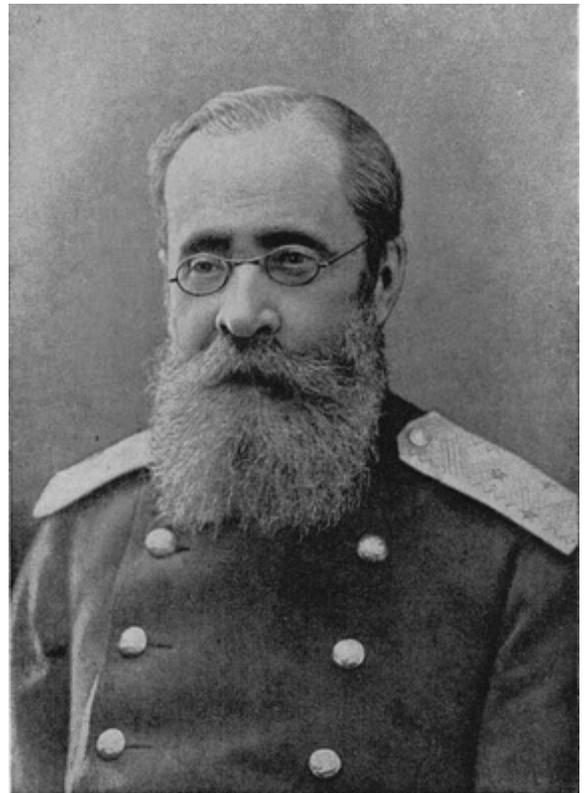
Balakirev believed that Cui's ambition should be to write operas as he was not impressed with his piano music and believed that Cui was only inspired by literary texts. During the winter of 1861–2 Cui, Rimsky, Mussorgsky and Balakirev met regularly to discuss music as comrades and pupils. Cui was about 26 and merely an amateur. He was too old for school or college and had a limited talent.

However, Cui kept a boarding house to prepare boys for entrance to military schools. His house at Voskresyensky had two grand pianos. It has been said that Emperor Nicholas II was a pupil of Cui. By now, the military instructor was married to a singer Malvina Rafayilovna. Cui also accompanied Mussorgsky in songs, as Mussorgsky had a good baritone voice. Cui also had another house for the summer season. But music was mainly a part-time activity as it was with Borodin, who was a chemist.

Cui became a critic on the St Petersburg's Vyedomosti and sometimes his remarks were caustic. He was also interested in art. In his music he was hopelessly inadequate at both orchestration and form which is why Balakirev advised him to concentrate on opera knowing that he could help with the orchestration. For his part Cui regarded Balakirev, along with Berlioz and Wagner, the finest of conductors and orchestrators. He also began to admire Rimsky's orchestration.

The composer Alexander Nikolayevich Serov (1820–1877) had grown in stature after his fantastic success with his opera, Judith, premiered in St Petersburg on 28 May 1863 and was becoming critical of Balakirev both of his music and conducting. There were arguments between Serov and Cui as well, and yet they had been good friends.

In 1867 Cui was working on his opera William Ratcliff, which was to become a great success, and Rimsky



loved it and admired the orchestration! Michael Kennedy's dictionary says it was composed between 1961–1968 and, therefore, it was started 43 years after his death. Cui wrote other operas including:

- * The Prisoner in the Causiaus, premiered in 1883
- * The Mandarin's Son operetta, 1859
- * Angelo, 1859
- * Le Filibuster, 1889, premiered at the Paris Opera Comique in 1894
- * The Saracen, 1901
- * Mam'zelle Fifi, 1903
- * Matteo Falcone, 1907
- * The Captain's daughter, 1911
- * Puss in Boots, which I believe has never been performed

By now The Five, also known as The Mighty Handful, were established as a musical force to be reckoned with. They were Balakirev, Mussorgsky, Borodin, Rimsky and Cui.

But music was still part-time. As with Schubert, he composed very quickly and the results are often poor. In 1878 Cui became professor of engineering at St Petersburg's Academy of Military Engineering.

He wrote many piece for the piano, sets of songs and four suites for orchestra and there are three string quartets, of which I have only heard the String Quartet in C, Op 45.

I find his music is amateurish and somewhat dull. This is the majority verdict as well. The saying that Cui was not a composer but an engineer may be valid. However, his operas, particularly William Ratcliff deserve to be heard.

He died on 24 March 1918 in Petrograd.

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